

# deconstruct faith<sup>✦</sup>

*How Questioning Your Religion Can Lead  
You to a Healthy and Holy God*

# discover Jesus

Preston Ulmer

I think many of us have been waiting for resources that help us consider the place of deconstruction—but not resources that patronize the process or try to correct those asking big questions. Those anticipating such tools will want to add this book to their library. Not only was I pleasantly surprised to read something useful; I was drawn into its contents as a participant, I was encouraged as a follower of Jesus, and I was affirmed as somebody who refuses to be satisfied with simplistic answers. Ulmer has assured me that I have a part to play and a responsibility to steward this skepticism with faithfulness on behalf of fellow skeptics everywhere.

**MARTY SOLOMON**, author of *Asking Better Questions of the Bible*, creator and executive producer of *The BEMA Podcast*

“Writing this book put me in some dangerous, irreverent territory.” The opening line of this book sums up the last several years of Preston Ulmer’s life—and the lives of those he interviewed for these pages. This book looks deconstruction fearlessly in the face; and I tell you, at times, I could sense Jesus beside me, reading along, really listening to the stories. Then, he opened his arms wide and beckoned to each person, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

**TRACI RHOADES**, author of *Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost* and *Shaky Ground*

As a pastor, I couldn’t be more thankful for Preston Ulmer’s voice in this critical and essential discussion. In his new book, we come face-to-face with the reality that many people in our culture are asking challenging questions, and simple or “churchy” answers will not suffice. Through Preston’s research and honest insight, we find hopeful inspiration to discover Jesus, not religion. Whether you have questions about faith or know someone who does, this book will bring you on a journey of learning grace and finding truth.

**JEREMY DEWEERDT**, senior pastor of City First Church

Brilliant! I couldn’t put this book down. Preston is not only an incredible thought leader, but he masterfully causes you to rethink everything you know about deconstructing your faith. This is a must-read for every person who desires to gain clarity and understanding while helping themselves and/or others through a process of biblical deconstruction amid our constantly changing world and its challenges. Preston is spot-on; all you have to do is follow the model set by the original deconstructionist, Jesus.

**JIM WILKES**, lead pastor of Journey Church

The body of Christ has been operated on by many inexperienced surgeons. And sadly, there have been many forgotten scalpels, sponges, and clamps left inside, creating a body that is less than whole. Preston is the delightfully uncomfortable surgeon who can help repair the body of Christ. Whether we admit it or not, we all “deconstruct”—and many

of us do so in unhealthy ways. Thus, Preston offers us advice: “Deconstruction should be a means to an end; namely, the reconstruction of one’s faith.”

**PETER HAAS**, lead pastor of Substance, author of *Pharisectomy*

Preston Ulmer makes a bold and compelling case that the call to continually deconstruct and reconstruct our faith lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Just as importantly, Preston offers readers wise guidance on how to deconstruct their faith without thereby losing it altogether. I believe that *Deconstruct Faith, Discover Jesus* is as timely a book as it is important, and I enthusiastically recommend all thoughtful followers of Jesus read it and apply it to their lives.

**GREG BOYD**, senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church, author of *Benefit of the Doubt*

In *Deconstruct Faith, Discover Jesus*, Preston Ulmer methodically guides the reader through a process of reasoning, wrestling, and discovery. With sincerity and skill, he creates a conversation everyone should have. Regardless of where you are in your faith journey, I encourage you to read and digest this work.

**GREG FORD**, lead pastor of One Church

Preston is the best kind of conversation partner. Even when you don’t agree with him, you can’t wait to meet and talk again. His compelling love for Jesus invigorates your own, and you walk away seeing others, yourself, and God more like Jesus does. Written with compassion and veteran skill, this book allows us to step into the shoes of our friends and loved ones, to hear their pain and their hope. In the mirror of their doubts and questions, we see our own, and together we look to Jesus.

**ZACK ESWINE**, author of *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*

This book has two tremendous benefits: It provides a very helpful four-step method for undertaking the needed deconstruction of unhelpful teachings, doctrines, and versions of Christianity; and it winsomely invites readers to draw nearer to Jesus rather than run away.

**REV. DR. DAVID P. GUSHEE**, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, chair in Christian social ethics at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

When we understand the incarnate mission of Jesus Christ, we will not distance ourselves from the curious, but we will position ourselves relationally centered among the skeptic, the critic, and the curious. Not only is this a book that I will refer to often; it’s a book that I will give to those who are looking for Jesus—and those who want to help others see him!

**DR. JEREMY JOHNSON**, lead pastor of North Point Church

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# A Note to the Reader

*Dear Reader,*

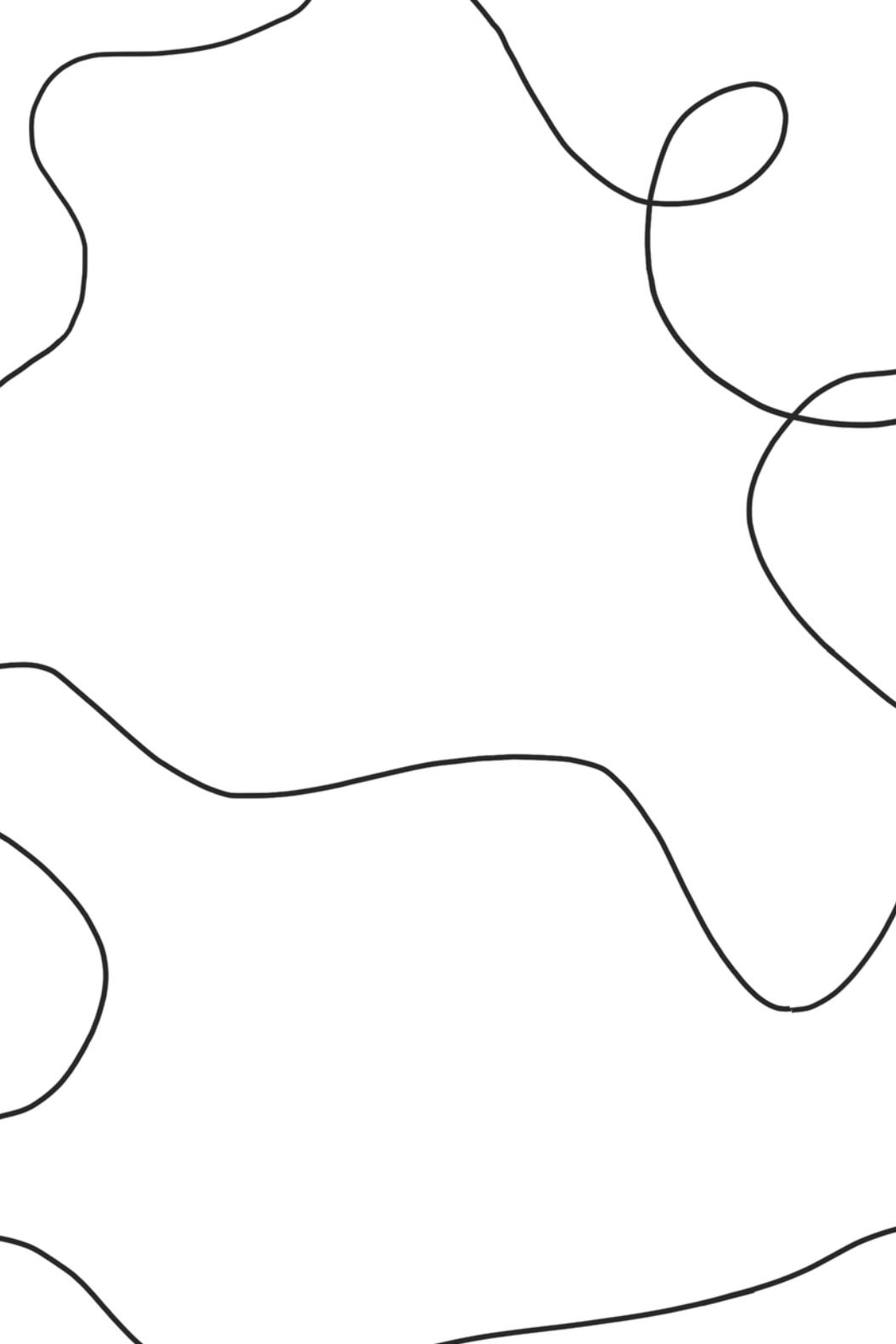
*I wrote this book as an advocate for those who are calling for deconstructing faith in light of the damage certain religious traditions and perspectives have caused. I've sensed, seen, and suffered some of the injustices mentioned in these pages but not nearly to the degree of others. The interviews and research conducted quickly revealed that my background does not put me among those who are affected most by the spiritual abuse coming from faith communities. In fact, as a white, straight, middle-class American male, my words and thoughts will never fully capture the stories and wounds that many (perhaps even you) are feeling. It's also likely that my work as a pastor contributes to a mindset that will never fully allow me to see the man behind the curtain.*

*My hope is that I can use any influence or platform I have to steer people away from damaging practices that seem to be embedded in modern evangelicalism. It's an odd space to be in, but I'm committed to it because I'm committed to you! There is a world of hurt, fear, and manipulation within many expressions of faith that, for God's sake, must be torn down. May the words in this book calm storms that need to be calmed and start storms that need to be weathered.*

*Finally, to you, the reader, it is my heart's desire that "the fringe" be empowered once again. Not merely reached. Empowered. The stories in these pages represent a growing demographic that (in many cases) is devoted to the right things. Together, may we find a faith that looks like Jesus and settle for nothing less.*

Preston





# Introduction

## *Saving Deconstruction*

*There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.*

MADELEINE L'ENGLE, *WALKING ON WATER*

*Do not hope. Observe. Because when you do, you'll see how much wonder the world actually has, and you won't be a cynic anymore.*

FLORA, *IN THE MOVIE FLORA & ULYSSES*



WRITING THIS BOOK put me in some dangerous, irreverent territory.

I was surprised to find Christ there.

Over countless hours of interviews and what sometimes felt like unending interrogation from Christians and those who have deconverted from the faith, there was always a risk to this project. From brothers and sisters in Christ, I would often hear remarks like

“How are you going to stay strong in your own faith?”

“Be careful not to become a skeptic.”

“What if *their* questions make *you* become an atheist?”

I'm used to this from the work I do with the Doubters' Club. Creating safe spaces for Christians and non-Christians to co-moderate discussions isn't necessarily “playing it safe.” But the warnings felt like more than mere echoes.

These kinds of phone calls and text messages are all valid concerns from my evangelical friends. They didn't want to see me change sides from "that of the Crucified to that of the crucifiers," as New Testament scholar C. F. D. Moule put it.<sup>1</sup> I would hear a variety of sentiments from the unconvinced, as well.

"You Christians need to experience the harsh reality of your hatred!"

"So when did you decide you weren't a Christian?"

"How the h\*\*\* can you work in the church world and think the way you do?"

Don't misunderstand. I wasn't going between these two camps for the sake of mining a good story for this book. Years ago, during my own deconstruction, I became desperate for an infrastructure that wouldn't become compromised during the storms of life. The theological home that I'd inherited wasn't my own, and I knew it had an issue with the foundation. It took time, but eventually I became convinced, and satisfied, by the story of Jesus' life. That is now the cornerstone of my views of God, Scripture, hell, politics, sexuality, and any other taboo topic (none of which have evangelicals cornered the market on). This project brought me all the way back to my foundation—the part of a home that no one notices unless it's crumbling. By no stretch of the imagination have I dismissed Christianity. On the contrary, I am convinced that Jesus deserves a better Christianity than what we're seeing in America and in the context of these heartbreaking stories.

If you look closely, you'll find that the way Jesus lived out his faith—deconstructing the parts of religion that humans had gotten wrong in order to express love for God and neighbors more authentically—is often overlooked, by Christians and non-Christians alike. In some ways, no-longer-Christians have gone beyond the No Trespassing signs into outright apostasy. Those landscapes will be evident to you as you read

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on. Not everyone who avoids the label “Christian” has left a Jesus-centric faith, however. Some of these people have a rather disorienting (but historically orthodox) approach to talking about their faith. It is unhinged from all dogmatic and abusive expressions of fundamentalism. They avoid the label because Christianity is too entwined with the former. They will never be evangelical again, but they are continually looking into the claims and actions of Jesus. One pastor I know who fits into this group classified himself as a “done.” “I’m done with Christianity but totally in love with Jesus,” he told me. And after hearing his story of abuse from his father, who was a deacon in their church, I don’t think I’d call myself a Christian either. I’ve found that this group of “dones” is increasingly compassionate to the poor and marginalized. They thrive on uncertainty, mystery, and loving people well. In many cases, these people were trespassed on by men and women in power. They were told they weren’t Christian *before* they chose to leave the faith.

Exiled before exiting.

Pushed out for wrestling.

Called “Trouble” for recognizing the tension.

And then given no attention since they were no longer attending.

I once heard a megachurch pastor say to church planters, “Don’t worry about those who didn’t come. Love those who did.” Herein lies the uncomfortable truth for anyone who calls themselves a Christian: *God’s attention will always be with those who aren’t in attendance*—that’s why he sent Jesus. God will always prioritize the unconvinced. He will always make way for the marginalized, and he will side with the skeptic when he can. Scripture reveals a very different God than the one so many people have walked away from. The God who calls us to reason together in Isaiah 1:18 knows that the heart has reasons that reason does not know. The heart needs the Incarnation to be convinced that it is truly known and truly loved. *That* is the peculiar God that we find in Jesus Christ. An incarnate Maker! Whoever told us that God is so holy that he can’t be in the presence of sin was wrong. Precisely because God

is holy, he must become like a sinner to win over the sinful. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on this often. “God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.”<sup>2</sup>

If God’s plan to reach those seemingly outside his grasp was the Incarnation, shouldn’t all our attempts to reach the lost require the same? Not much can be done at arm’s length, from the safety and security of the church. Neither can we expect that pastors and teachers must exceed any measure that we aren’t willing to explore ourselves.

God knew that his best opportunity to populate heaven was by becoming one of us, by experiencing every dimension of what it means to be human. And so “this High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NLT). We don’t need a personal, face-to-face encounter with Jesus to convince us of our belovedness. But Christ, without sin and coming into the world as a human, shows us that God loves us just as we are, not as we should be.

The Incarnation declares that God loves us, isn’t scared of us, and wants us to be unafraid of him. So how do we declare these truths to the masters of suspicion of our day? The deconstructing, disoriented, disengaged skeptics.

We become like them, minus the skepticism.

If we learn to live through the eyes of our lost brothers and sisters, we become an ever more convincing group of people. And as soon as we start taking seriously the idea that God found the best option to be becoming one of us to get us, we’ll start taking seriously the idea that, perhaps, we must do the same. Any group that we consider lost, misinformed, or even unreachable, God is inviting us to wear their shoes. Learn their language. Eat their food. We must not only know their names but also share their label. When it comes to the growing number

of deconverting “nones” and “dones” in the West, we must get in touch with their reality. Know their weaknesses and temptations but encounter it all without deconverting. To do this, we must think like and encounter life like a deconstructionist. Scripture tells us that Jesus “did not sin,” meaning Jesus has taken that which feels so secular and made it sacred. However sinful and secular deconversion feels to us, becoming a deconstructionist is its sacred, saving grace.

## **Rethinking Everything You Know for the Sake of the Unconvinced**

This book is an invitation for the Christian who is desperate to be in relationship with their friends and family who are skeptical of Christianity. If that’s you, I’m inviting you into the Incarnation for the sake of those who have not experienced how Christ would baptize a critical mind. And in the same way that the Incarnation was God declaring, once again, that men and women are sacred, we must remind the world that deconstructing is as well. How uninformed are those of us who follow the teachings of Jesus but not his incarnation.

One of the most pivotal books for me has been *The Body Keeps the Score*. I have learned more about the wholeness of my being (body, soul, and mind) from that book than from any of my thirty-plus seminary courses. The author, Bessel van der Kolk, offers a bold new paradigm for healing. There is a particular passage in this book that reminds all of us of how impactful it can be when someone chooses to walk in the shoes of another.

At the opening session for a group of former Marines, the first man to speak flatly declared, “I do not want to talk about the war.” I replied that the members could discuss anything they wanted. After half an hour of excruciating silence, one veteran finally started to talk about his helicopter crash. To

my amazement the rest immediately came to life, speaking with great intensity about their traumatic experiences. All of them returned the following week and the week after. In the group they found resonance and meaning in what had previously been only sensations of terror and emptiness. They felt a renewed sense of the comradeship that had been so vital to their war experience. They insisted that I had to be part of their newfound unit and gave me a Marine captain's uniform for my birthday.<sup>3</sup>

Van der Kolk continued this idea by talking about another time when he counseled a group of veterans. His account of that story ends with "For Christmas they gave me a 1940s GI-issue wristwatch. As had been the case with my group of Marines, I could not be their doctor unless they made me one of them."<sup>4</sup>

We must become like those we wish to help. In this case, renewing your mind might include rethinking everything you thought you knew for the sake of the unconvinced (Romans 12:2). As Shane Parrish is believed to have said, "The best thinking is rethinking."

## **It's Not a Phase—It's a Holy Process**

This book makes the case that in addition to being an invitation, deconstruction is a holy process that you can participate in with your non-Christian family and friends. If you are a Christian, I assume you are reading with one eyebrow raised, your head tilted to the side, and a list of objections. I might as well tip my hand . . .

Deconstruction is a discipline of Jesus, and Jesus' followers would be wise to reclaim it. That is this book's central, controversial idea.

Although much of this book is committed to surveying what exactly deconstruction is and how it is helpful, there is a rather clear definition that seems to capture the essence of the term. Deconstruction is "the taking apart

## INTRODUCTION

of an idea, practice, tradition, belief, or system into smaller components in order to examine their foundation, truthfulness, usefulness, and impact.”<sup>5</sup>

This book is going to invite you into the mindset of a deconstructionist. A worldview that gives you a high capacity for paradoxes. A mental space that outweighs our self-interest in being right. A tendency to see Christian beliefs as inseparable from Christian ethics. Because what we believe about people does, in fact, determine how we treat them.

I originally set out to write a book that balanced deconstructing Christianity with reconstructing a generous orthodoxy that would be appealing to the doubting evangelical. One that has Jesus’ words and actions at its core. We will still go there. However, that’s not our final destination. While I fully believe that getting to a Jesus-centered foundation should be the goal of deconstructing, I don’t think it’s about balancing the two. After conducting over sixty-five interviews for this book, I have come to learn that deconstruction is a discipline of the mind. A strategy for the thoughtful Jesus follower. Quite frankly, it’s a way to stay Christian.

Deconstruction is like deweeding a flower bed. There are tools for it and ways to do it well. And it needs to be done constantly. Otherwise, the beauty of God is choked out by the nature of things.

My goal is not to tell you what you need to deconstruct but how to do it. I’m also not interested in telling anyone that they need to become a proud, elitist thinker. On the contrary! When we start to identify ourselves as anything other than a child of God, we stop becoming who God created us to be. Being a “deconstructionist” is no different. It’s highly problematic when it has become our identifier. It’s my hope that the inheritance of a sharp mind would be reclaimed by those who know there is more to Christianity than what we are currently experiencing.

For some, deconstructing the Christian faith is nothing more than an irreverent personal odyssey. For others, it’s the only way they know how to be a Christian. If you don’t land in one of those two camps, I’m certain you know someone who does. It’s an unavoidable reality at this point. Everyone is talking about deconstruction, and it’s here to stay.



Perhaps you consider deconstructing Christianity to be nothing more than a “phase of life.” A time, somewhere in adolescence, when people ask questions about God.

Don't we all?

At which point you may be used to the church exposing doubters to apologetics. A few small-group lessons, maybe even a “How to Defend Your Faith” conference, and *poof!* Crisis averted. Last I checked, for the first time since 1940, church membership has dropped below 50 percent nationwide. Beyond the decline in church membership, there is an ever-increasing number of Americans who express no interest in religion.<sup>6</sup> This is a little more than a phase.

Perhaps you see deconstruction as a buzzword. Something that keeps popping up on the internet. It feels a lot like cryptocurrency. You know it's out there and that we should all learn about it, but it seems too complicated. Let's leave it up to the professionals. The only problem with that is the professionals are the ones deconstructing, and they are taking the masses with them. If you use buzzwords enough, they become normal.

I think we are there.

For many Christians, deconstruction isn't a phase or a buzzword but a habit. It's the *modus operandi* of their prayer life and Bible reading. It's the unavoidable tension between what someone *says* they believe and what they *actually believe* Jesus might be saying. Perhaps this is you. Deconstruction isn't a category—it's part of how you think. You are a deconstructionist. Your mind weighs everything. And as of late, everything about evangelical Christianity has been weighing on you. The good news is: You're in good company! The even better news?

You are in Jesus' company.

Jesus is our guide on this rather orthodox journey. My prayer is that you feel a sigh of relief throughout the pages of this book. Following Jesus is still the best way forward, and deconstruction is allowed. And once you have been comforted by the Deconstructing Savior, you can offer the strategy in these pages as solace to another.

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This book is filled with people who are in the middle of processing their stories, and wherever they land, deconstruction and reconstruction are intricate parts of who they are becoming.

I should also let you know something that you may already be aware of: I will be processing on these pages as well.

It is because of my commitment to Christ that I must take all the stories and stats seriously. Also, I am trying to figure out how to pass this faith on to my own children. I have a vested interest in this topic because I want my children to know Truth better than I ever have. There are some devastating stories that I would rather my family avoid at all costs. So if this book feels more personal than academic, that's because it is. I will often cite the experts, but I'm not writing for them. This book is for the Christian who wants a more generous orthodoxy. One that allows, and expects, doubts from themselves and others.

In *The Anatomy of Deconversion*, author John Marriot states:

Christians of all stripes must reflect on the kind of faith they are passing on to those they are ministering to. Is it a fragile and bloating house of cards comprising core tenets of the faith and our own micro traditions elevated to the level of orthodoxy that must be believed in order to be saved? . . . The irony is that the very means which some churches have used to keep their people within the fold significantly contributed to their deconversion.<sup>7</sup>

More important, it seems, than the stability of Christian doctrine is the ability to love like a true Christian. Which is the foundation of any doctrine we'd want to teach in the first place! Let this book be an attempt at loving the deconstructionist into a season of reconstruction and loving Jesus enough to follow him into that season ourselves, should he, in his infinite wisdom, invite us on that path.

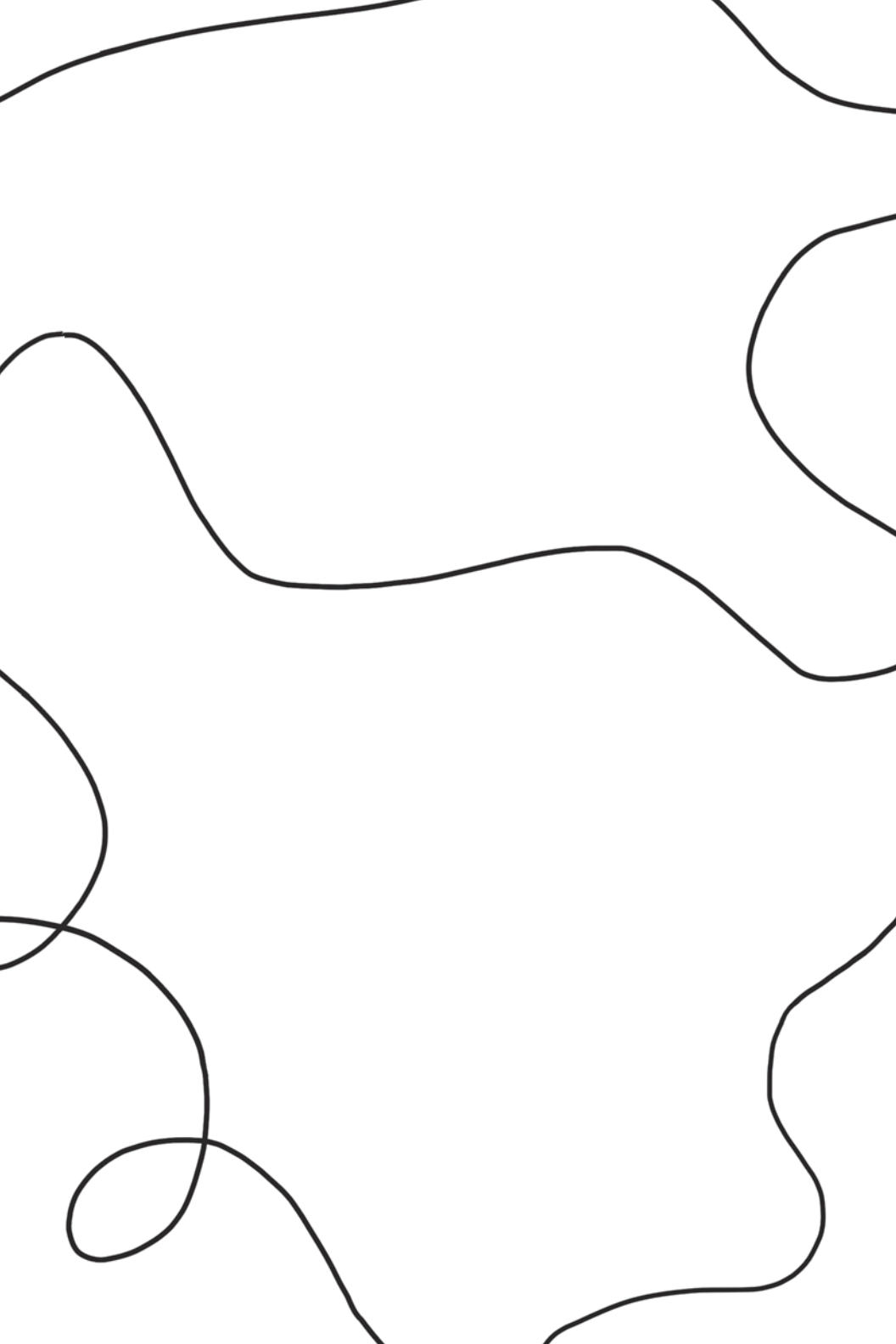
I have a feeling that the Spirit is leading us all to deconstruct a faith that isn't working.



PART ONE

# Why Deconstruct





## Chapter 1

# Deconstruction Is Part of Our Spiritual Heritage

*I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice.*

RED (MORGAN FREEMAN), *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*

*If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, *IMMATURITY*



ANYTIME I'M ASKED TO SPEAK on the topic of deconstruction, I try to do as much research as possible beforehand to figure out who will be in the crowd. It never deters me to know which brand of Christians will be listening; it just helps me anticipate objections that may arise. The frugality of our doctrines is usually exposed when talking about topics such as reforming Christianity, church hurt, spiritual abuse, and why we should listen to critics. Part of it might be because we don't want to believe such atrocities could have happened in the name of God. Another part could be that believing such things would mean admitting that we might have contributed to the problem. Either way, the sub-categories of deconstruction often seem like a taboo subject.

For this event, I was asked to give an hour-long speech on "Holy Deconstruction." It was taking place in Northern California, where one might reasonably assume people think outside of their biases—or so I

thought. Sometimes even I make assumptions about the conservative or progressive perspective someone may have based on their location. I was speaking to a room full of pastors, however, and as Upton Sinclair puts it, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!”<sup>1</sup>

Flying in from the intemperate, noncoastal Midwest, I was surprised to see so many pastors in shorts or swim trunks filling the room. The room host read the brief topic summary that I had sent in weeks before, giving me enough time to turn off my phone and notice a coffee stain on my pants as I walked to the front. I talked for forty minutes about how a deconstructionist mindset can be (in its purest form) akin to the mindset of Christ. As soon as my talk ended and the Q and A began, a hand went up in the air from the front row, like a bullet in the chamber. I admire those who sit in the front row and are bold enough to ask questions.

“Thank you for being here,” he began, cordially. The calm before the storm. “This whole topic of deconstruction reminds me of when the serpent asked Eve, ‘Did God really say that?’ Essentially, you’re teaching people to question God’s Word. It’s the age-old sin! You’re telling us that deconstructing our faith is a good thing? I have youth leaders who are doing this right now, and it’s making them question the Bible. How am I supposed to help them deconstruct when it results in them asking questions about what I believe the Bible says?”

I was about to respond when I realized the interrogation wasn’t over. The man continued, “Don’t you think this deconstruction method is dangerous if it’s going to result in these youth leaders seeing the Bible differently? How can they be on our church staff if we don’t believe the same things?”

Finally, he asked a question that I will never forget: “What if teaching people to read the Bible through a Jesus lens makes us *all* change our minds about what the Bible says?”

Have you ever read such an honest, unfiltered question? Though I

never fully resolved the impact of that question, I did let him know that clearly he understood the point of the lecture. Offering vacuous answers and quoting a few pertinent Scriptures isn't the answer. We must be willing to help people discover what Jesus has said about the issues they're wrestling with. Which means we must be willing to let go of our own interpretation of Scripture in the process.

You may be beginning this book with the same suspicion and concern as my front-row interrogator. If so, may I propose something new?

What if the ultimate tragedy isn't a lost person going to hell but a Christian who helps them get there by restraining the spirit of curiosity?

If you don't believe that Christ would endorse a process of holy deconstruction, then perhaps it would be helpful to see how the Christianity you hold tightly to is the result of the deconstructionists who have gone before you. The "cloud of witnesses" witnessed something entirely different from the religion of their day.

What if deconstructing religion is part of our spiritual heritage?

## **Overindulgent Christianity**

When we deconstruct our religion or our faith, we aren't deconstructing what God said. We are deconstructing what *others say* God has said. The time we live in is historic! I don't mean it will be remembered in future generations (although that may be true). I mean we've been here before.

If you've ever studied the ingredients involved in former reformations, you'll notice that many of them sound like what we've heard about the deconstruction movement. See if any of these descriptions sound familiar:

Church leaders are afraid that people's own interpretations could lead them astray.

Challenges to doctrine are coming from those who have committed their lives to religion.



New resources and platforms have arisen to expedite the spread of such news.

Religious leaders are shaming the voices who cry out for radical reformation toward a Jesus-looking God.

If you are a Protestant reading this, this is the story of your ancestors, not your enemies.

These are ancient echoes from centuries ago.

This is the sound of your spiritual migration.

Look back a mere five hundred years ago and we bump into a character who radically adjusted the landscape of Christianity. Until the 1500s, religious leaders safeguarded their reading of the Bible to fuel their finances, traditions, and power structures . . . until a random monk decided to challenge everything. You may call him a reformer, but I like to refer to Martin Luther as a deconstructionist.

## **Martin Luther as a Deconstructionist**

From the sixth to the sixteenth century, Roman Catholicism was the dominant form of Christianity. It's almost impossible to overemphasize the scope of the church's power during the Middle Ages. The role of the priest was emphasized at just about every turn. They baptized people at a young age. They heard the confessions of congregants. They determined the processes couples would go through to get married, and they officiated the weddings. They were present bedside to provide last rights. Other chores of the priesthood included distributing alms to the poor and providing the educational services available. At the height of its dominance, the church owned over one-third of the land in Europe, which made it the most powerful economic and political force on the continent. All this sounds like Roman Catholicism could be the foundation to the world's greatest act of charity, until you bring in power and finances. During Martin Luther's day, these were gained by something

called indulgences, and they were the busiest and most lucrative undertaking of the priesthood.

An indulgence was a partial, or full, remission of one's sin based on the amount of money paid for forgiveness. Many times it would be accompanied with a promise to reduce one's sentence in purgatory. In other words, priests were acting as the gatekeepers of everyone's eternal state. I can't think of anything that I would give more money to than protecting the eternal state of my own soul. You may be wondering why people would put up with such an outlandish interpretation of Scripture. Confession booths and indulgences were based on the pope's interpretation of Scripture. Since the Bible wasn't yet translated into German or any other common language of the day, the religious powers could misuse spiritual authority without anyone knowing. They chose to line their pockets with the text, and unless you knew how to read Latin, you wouldn't know any better. That is, until Martin Luther learned to read Latin.

Luther was no stranger to the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Trained in the Holy Scriptures, he lived as a monk in multiple locations and constantly sought higher education. Receiving his doctorate from Wittenberg University was more than an academic achievement. This gave Luther a platform of authority just under the pope since the pope himself had to confirm the charter of the university. It was a symbol of confirmation upon Luther that his practices, and doctrine, were condoned by the priesthood and to be received by the people. All this was dependent on having total compliance from Luther. And why wouldn't he comply? He would be the main beneficiary of indulgences and receive many pardons from civil cases if he were ever in need of them.

The problem was Luther could now read the Bible and he had seen the belly of the beast. As it's believed he said, "You are not only responsible for what you say, but also for what you do not say." He could not sit back and quietly allow religion to be the face of God to the people. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the Wittenberg Church. He wasn't trying to destroy

the doctrines of his day. On the contrary! Luther was very specific. The Ninety-Five Theses were aimed at deconstructing the practice and theology of indulgences. Which, of course, challenged the whole system of religious gain. There were many educated deconstructionists before Luther, but Luther had something available to him that none of them had had: the printing press. Over eighteen hundred of Luther's writings appeared between 1517 and 1526.<sup>2</sup> Luther's ideas spread like wildfire to other priests and Catholics. In case you heard the Sunday-school version of Luther's story, his ideas were brash and radical. In 1519 he even called the pope the antichrist prophesied by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2–3.<sup>3</sup> His most significant contribution, however, was translating the Bible into German. Luther was deeply convicted by the concept of a "priesthood of all believers," and he mobilized the idea by putting a Bible in the hands of anyone who was willing to read it.

Martin Luther was annoying to the religious ones with power.

He wanted the face of Jesus to be the face of forgiveness to the people.

By challenging the unbiblical practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the time, Luther split Christianity into two distinct camps—Catholic and Protestant. It's no accident that within the word *Protestant* is the word *protest*. It took a protest of religion to help people see Jesus. If you ever read Martin Luther's story in detail, you'll notice how the religious leaders did everything they could to discount his influence. During the rise of the reformation, Henry VIII condemned Luther and said that those who followed his teachings had no charity, were swollen with glory, had lost their reason, and burned with envy.<sup>4</sup>

If we aren't careful, we, too, will damn the deconstructionists of our day to preserve the destructive behaviors of our systems.

## Prophetically Speaking

Luther might have only been following in the footsteps of the prophets. The prophets in the Old Testament were certainly reformers of their

day. They were exceptionally gifted at reframing and reforming people's view of God. In fact, I believe Luther, Jesus, the prophets, and any other deconstructing reformers are primarily focused on God's relationship with his people. The rigorous attempt at deconstructing religion is always so that people will be mesmerized by the face of God and want to be in relationship with him.

Besides the "dense poetry and strange imagery," the prophets have a compelling quality about them. They are often crying out against the adultery and idolatry of the people and pleading that Israel return to God. According to the BibleProject, translating the prophets requires seeing some common patterns.<sup>5</sup>

God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and invited them to become a nation of justice and generosity, that would represent his character to the nations. So this partnership required all Israelites give their trust and allegiance to their God alone. . . . But the leaders—the priests, the kings—led Israel astray, and they broke the covenant. So this is where the prophets came in, to remind Israel of their role in the partnership. And they did this in three ways. First, they were constantly accusing Israel for violating the terms of the covenant. The charges usually include idolatry, alliances with other nations and their gods, and allowing injustice towards the poor. . . . Second, the prophets called the Israelites to repent. . . . That brings us to the third way the prophets emphasized the covenant: They announced the consequences for breaking it, which they called "the Day of the Lord."<sup>6</sup>

Notice how similar the prophets are to the protestors of the 1500s. And how similar the protestors of today are to the prophets.

Like the prophets, modern protestors of Christian culture are inviting evangelical leaders back to justice and generosity. Why? Because this represents the character of God to all nations! Additionally, the prophets

faced most of their opposition from the priests and the kings who led Israel astray. It was the prophets' job to speak to those in power and bring a course correction to the nation of Israel. It was the prophets who used unvarnished language to bring attention to the broken covenant and misuse of spiritual practices. It was the prophets who let their entire life become an object lesson demonstrating the relationship between God and his people. Was this not why Hosea was told to stay married to a prostitute (Hosea 1:2)? Or why Isaiah walked around naked to illustrate the state of the nation without God's protection (Isaiah 20:2-4)? Or why Ezekiel had to eat a scroll (Ezekiel 3:1-3)?

The peculiarities of the prophets always deconstructed the way the Israelites viewed their current status before God. More times than not, it was to call out the divided allegiances Israel had with other nations and gods. In other words, Israel was sleeping with politicians and policies in order to gain something, while the poor were without justice or help.

This may sound graphic, but I encourage you to read Ezekiel 23:1-8 for context. The passage is full of imagery of God's people being like prostitutes who compromise their modesty for power. It's clear from the passage that Israel is lusting after the governors and commanders. At one point, God warns Israel through Ezekiel by saying, "There she lusted after her lovers . . ." (Ezekiel 23:20). The rest of that passage is so explicit, my publisher asked me to take it out. Go read it for yourself. The language of the prophets is unsanitized precisely to get the attention of the religious leaders. Sometimes, we are so far gone it takes offensive language to get us to see just how offensive our lives have become.

There is an alarming amount of language throughout the Bible aimed at religious strongholds. The prophets reveal to us a strange quality about deconstruction. Sure, it takes intensity and an all-in mentality. More than that, finding God through the chaos of a broken covenant will always mean offending the ones who broke the covenant.

I want to be careful to not equate all critics of Christianity with the prophets of the Old Testament. Of course the difference lies in someone's

## DECONSTRUCTION IS PART OF OUR SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

devotion to God. However, there is a prophetic liberty you are given if you deconstruct for the sake of revealing a more Jesus-looking God. The process will require approaching topics in their most real form. You'll have to see through the desperate eyes of someone who has been hurt and exiled. You'll create language that draws in the outsider and makes the insider uncomfortable.

Remember, deconstruction isn't destruction, but some people won't know the difference.